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## THE RESHAPING OF THE MIDDLE EAST

*By Benoy Kumar Sarkar*

While the heat of the armageddon has forged new peoples of Europe into self-conscious statehood, the swan-song of national existence is being sung by one of the oldest peoples of the world. The slow but steady passing of Persia is probably the greatest though the most unobserved and the least talked-of event of world politics during the Great War. The imagination of mankind has indeed been fired by the emergence of Ukrainians, Czecho-Slovaks, and so forth, as more or less sovereign units in the international family. Democracy also has acquired a new lease and a new sanction for humanity through the theory of self-determination promulgated by the radicals of Bolshevik Russia and popularized by the President of the United States. But, as if to demonstrate the Rembrandtesque chiaroscuro in social evolutions, the world is silently witnessing the shades of annihilation that are fast enveloping the nearly fifteen million Shiahite (heterodox) Moslems of the Middle East.

The tragedy of Persia is not, however, an unknown phenomenon, not at any rate to the people of America. For it was an American citizen who, not long ago in 1912, exposed to the world at large the fact of the "strangling" of Persia. This honest disclosure elicited from Asia at that time a profound admiration for the American character, which was only equalled by another almost synchronous incident consisting in the official declaration of the United States that it would not participate in the Six-Power-Loan to the nascent Chinese republic on the ground that the action might necessitate intervention in the internal administration of China. But since then Persia seems to have dropped out of the consciousness of politicians in Asia and Eur-America. They are probably waiting to be startled

one day by the news that "Baytud Din," or the Home of Religion, as the land is known to its people, has formally passed into a dependency.

### I. RECONSTRUCTION IN THE PERSIAN GULF

And yet, paradoxically enough, it is true that all through the war period Persia actively engaged the brains of the diplomatists and war-chiefs of the belligerents. It could not be otherwise. For it is the Persian Gulf that has ever remained the objective of all railway enterprises for connecting Asia with Europe and bringing the undeveloped regions of the East under the domination of the advanced Western races.

The war has no doubt given an undue prominence and notoriety to the almost completed Berlin-Bagdad Railway, the artery of a might-have-been Eur-Asian Empire for Germany. In reality, however, in this as in other adventures of colonial exploitation the Germans have been but the last in the field. For it was only in 1903 that the Anatolian Railway Company (German) obtained the concession for extending the Constantinople-Konia line (1872, 1888) to Bagdad, whereas England and France have been enjoying railway concessions in Asia Minor ever since the Crimean War (1857). Besides, in 1895 the thousand mile line from Cairo-Port Said to Kuwait (at the head of the Persian Gulf in Turkey) was almost on the point of being negotiated between the powers that be for an all-British route from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian and Australasian Zones. Even more important in world-politics was the Russian project of penetrating northern Persia as far as Teheran, or Hamadan (the ancient Ecbatana, the capital of the Median Empire, not far from the historic rock of Behistun which bears the inscriptions of Darius), or Yezd in Central Persia. This was to have been effected by extending the trans-Caspian line from Merv or Kushk and the trans-Caucasian railroad from Tabriz, the terminus that has been reached during the war time in 1915. The Russian scheme also contemplated reaching the warm waters of the South

Asian Seas at Bushire, or Bunder Abbas or Chahbar or Gwadar.

A rather curious fact in connection with this trans-Persian railway project of Russia is that she has had the active coöperation of England definitely since January, 1912. This seems to be inconsistent with the traditional Russo-phobia of the British. But it is not strange because, as is well known, Russia had recognized the "special interests" of Great Britain in the Gulf and had declared that it lay outside the scope of the Anglo-Russian Agreement of August 31, 1907.

England had also been relieved of another thorn in her side. Because the Anglo-French Entente of 1906 put a stop to France's pin-prick and obstructionist policy with regard to England, her enemy of Egyptian and Fashoda memories, in the Persian Gulf as in other spheres. Finally, in 1914 the French firmly cemented the new British friendship by surrendering, in consideration of financial compensation and new rights in Gambia (West Africa), the privileges and immunities of the traffic in arms with Maskat in the Gulf of Oman, which the Anglo-French treaty of 1862 accorded to France.

By the time, therefore, that the war began in Europe the two old competitors of the British Empire had been eliminated from the Middle East. The Persian Gulf was then a British lake. It is superfluous to add that it became necessarily a most powerful challenge to the military and naval might of the Germans, the latest of the empire-seekers. The magnitude of Germany's ambition in this direction and the depth of her disappointment at failure can be intelligible only if the world fully realizes that Britannia did not rule the waves of the Irish Sea and the Bay of Bengal more securely than she did the sheet of water about 500 miles long and 200 miles wide between Arabia and Persia. The western littoral, i.e., the seacoast of Turkey in Asia was for over a quarter of a century as British-dominated as the eastern, i.e., the Persian shore, and further on, the Mekran Coast.

At the northwest head lies Kuweit which under British influence virtually declared its independence of the Ottoman Empire in 1899. In 1914 it occupied the same status in international politics as Mongolia and Tibet with regard to China and the Powers since 1907. Contiguous to this region which was covetously looked for by the Germans as the possible sea-terminus of the Bagdad Railway lies Mohammerah in the northeast corner of the Gulf, at the mouth of the Karun River, within the jurisdiction of the Shah of Persia. This area also has long ceased to acknowledge Persian suzerainty and has been a *de facto* British protectorate. It is in fact the base of the British Oilfields in Persia. When the war broke out, therefore, the Shatt-el-Arab from its mouth as far inland as Basra, about sixty miles in Turkish territory, was a thoroughly British river.

Coming down the Arabian littoral, we have the Bahrein archipelago noted for the pearl fishery. Here since 1861, as in Cyprus since 1878 and in Egypt since 1882, the British rather than the Ottoman flag has been in the ascendant. Further down, the so-called Pirate Coast with the important port of Debai has been under the control of the British Resident at Bushire since 1853. This brings us to Cape Musandin, the tip of the Arabian Coast which juts into the Persian side at Bunder Abbas. Here indeed we have the Gibraltar of the Middle East commanding the Straits of Ormuz, the narrow entrance to this Asian Mediterranean. For, the province of Oman which is the hinterland of the Pirate Coast, as well as the island of Maskat came to recognize British guardianship during the Napoleonic wars, while Bunder Abbas is the terminus of the "British sphere" in Persia as delimited by the Anglo-Russian Agreement.

Now, on the eastern side, the littoral from Bunder Abbas to Mohammerah, i.e., the entire Persian shore of the Gulf, lies within what is technically known as the "neutral sphere" according to the same document. But actually the fine port of Lingah, as one proceeds up, is under British domination, and Bushire, further up, has long been the Shanghai of this Zone, where the British Resident's will is law.

Only once was this hegemony of England in the Persian Gulf liable to be seriously threatened. In 1901 during the dark days of Great Britain while she was preoccupied with South African affairs the Russian papers were rabid in their open avowals for the seizure of Bunder Abbas as counterpoise to British Kuwait. In fact Russia did not hesitate to declare her intention of Russifying entire Persia. But the balance of power in the Middle East turned in favor of England as soon as the close of the Boer War left her energies free to attend to the situation. As against the Russian manifesto for monopolizing Persia Lord Lansdowne pronounced the British article of faith in 1903 in the following terms: "We should regard the establishment of a fortified post in the Persian Gulf by any other Power as a very grave menace to British interests which we should certainly resist with all the means at our disposal." Thus was enunciated the English Monroe Doctrine for the Persian Gulf. And this *status quo* was accepted by Russia in 1907 as a solution of the question.

It is not astonishing therefore that since the Anglo-Russian agreement the Turks should have automatically looked upon Germany as their natural ally, and that the Persians should have been pro-German or rather anti-ally in sympathy during the war. But the war found Germany and Turkey absolutely without any footing on the entire Ottoman littoral. For long before the war the British had succeeded in frustrating German overtures at Kuwait and at Shargarh on the Pirate Coast. Similarly Turkey's attempts to restore her suzerainty in Kuwait, Bahrein, Oman and Maskat had failed through British backing of the local Sheikhs, Sultans, Chiefs or Governors. And of course it could not take long to quell the few pro-German (Turk) upheavals in the Gulf region. The disturbances at Maskat were put down by a British Indian Army in 1915; and in 1916 a British force was posted at Bahrein to meet eventualities. On the Persian shore likewise the few Anti-British risings were sharply suppressed in 1915 and 1916. On the other hand, the tables were turned by the fall of Bagdad and the conquest of Mesopotamia in March 1917. The Turco-Ger-

mans had to be systematically on the defensive since then. Thus came to end the chances of Germany's ever questioning England's position in the Gulf.

The only Powers that could compete with England are England's allies and comrades in arms. But, as noted above France had renounced her claims in the Gulf in 1906 and 1914. She is not likely to reopen the question in future, for the French interests involved are too trivial. Russia also had indeed been friendly, but her desire to have a Port Arthur on the South Asian Seas would surely have needed England's watchful attention. With the revolution of March 1917, however, and especially the total collapse under Bolshevik régime since November of the same year Russia had ceased to be a controlling factor in world politics. Consequently at the beginning of 1918 England found herself the undisputed ruler of the Gulf. This towering predominance has finally been sealed by the unconditional surrender of Turkey in October 1918, and the ignominious failure of Germany on all fronts in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

## II. THE NEW PERSIA IN REALPOLITIK

Persia is one of those few countries which like the seven Latin American states, Mexico, Salvador, Colombia, Venezuela, Paraguay, Argentina, and Chile, remained technically neutral during the hemispheroidal armageddon. It is in fact the only country in Asia excepting its neighbour Afghanistan and the Dutch Indies that did not declare itself formally against Germany's challenge of the British world-empire by a counter Eur-Asian combination. But in spite of its official neutrality Persia was a theatre of military operations not less active than German Shantung and British Egypt. And of course it was constantly disturbed by such intrigues and secret manoeuvres of the belligerents as are inevitable among neutral peoples when practically whole mankind is in arms.

In the summer of 1914 when the war broke out in Europe Persian politics were in a very unsettled condition. The Third Majlis (National Council or Parliament) had just



been elected, and the young Shah Ahmad Mirza ceremonially crowned (July 21). But since the abolition of the Second Majlis which was perpetrated in December 1911 in order to placate Russia and Great Britain in their demands relating to the appointment of foreigners in Persian public service, the constitutional or nationalist party had been left without any controlling hand in the administration. It is notorious, further, that throughout the *risorgimento* or revolutionary period since August 1906, the royalist, arbitrary and reactionary elements in Persia have had the systematic backing of the two interested Powers. This circumstance had the inevitable result of throwing the liberals, democrats and advocates of reform, like the Young Turk party in the western Moslem state, into the arms of Germany, and of compelling them to seek in her the only possible deliverer of the Middle East. The war, therefore, found Persia sharply divided in sentiment, the Shah and the Court party pro-ally, and the people or Young Persia pro-German (-Turk).

It was certainly easy enough to bring about the severance of official Persia's relation with the Central Powers, as in the cases of Bolivia, Peru, Uruguay, and Ecuador. In 1915 German, Austrian and Turkish ministers left Teheran. But during the first two years of the war anti-British risings of the people occurred frequently in Southern and Eastern Persia. Specially affected were the areas about Isfahan and Shiraz. Intensely serious was the situation in the port of Bushire which, therefore, had to be kept under British occupation from August to October. Seistan also on the Afghan frontier, the ever-debatable ground between England and Russia, came virtually into British hands. Finally in 1916 Kerman was occupied.

In the meantime Northern and Western Persia had the European war brought home to it through the Russian advance from Azarbaijan, the British advance towards Kut, and the Turkish resistance to both from the Bagdad Zone. By 1916 the failure of the British in Mesopotamia enabled Turkey to occupy Kirmanshah and Hamadan in Persia and thus cut off the Russian army from the contemplated coöperation with the British on the Tigris.



But in March, 1917, the fall of Bagdad and the disappearance of Turkey from the Mesopotamian region placed western Persia and Kurdistan within the sphere of British influence. The sway of the British power was further extended northwards through the dislocation in the Russian army because of the revolution (March 16), and especially through its total collapse under the Bolshevik régime (November 7). In 1918, therefore, England may be said to have automatically stepped into the vacuum, in the Urumiah basin and Azarbaijan, created by the retirement of Russia from the war. It is clear therefore that from the military standpoint Persia was thoroughly exploited; and yet the violation of Persia seems to be the least known event of the Great War.

How is it that such a thing could happen in Asia without any comment or even notice on the part of the students of international law or of the humanitarian democrats of the world, while it is precisely the violation of an European Persia that was ostensibly the *casus belli* of this war of all nations? The explanation is to be sought in the fact, not candidly and avowedly recognized, that Persia had ceased to be a Persian state long before the war broke out.

In a sense Persia's *status de jure* was indeed that of Belgium, as England and Russia had agreed in 1907 not to permit each other to intervene in the affairs of the land. But in actuality Young Persia's efforts at reconstruction on the lines of constitutional monarchy were thwarted by the Powers at every step. Shah Mohammed Ali (1907-1909) used to be aided and abetted by them so that he might curb the parliamentary endeavours of the people. Early in 1908 the First Majlis had even to encounter Russo-British demands to the effect that it must obey and submit to the Shah. In June it was totally overthrown and demolished by the Shah with the "Cossack Brigade" commanded by a Russian colonel. The Persian revolution could not, however, be thus nipped in the bud. The people mustered strength in the provincial cities, marched from Tabriz and Isfahan on Teheran the capital, deposed the Shah (July 16, 1909) and restored the parliament. The way

before this Second Majlis also was beset with difficulties by the Powers. Taking advantage of the revolutionary unrest, Russia quartered troops at Tabriz and other cities in Northern Persia, and England issued an ultimatum demanding the surrender of the roads in Southern Persia to be policed by the British Indian army at the cost of the Persian Customs Department (October 16, 1910).

Nor was this all. The ex-Shah's intrigues with the royalists in Persia were winked over by England and Russia in spite of the terms of the protocol by which he had been pensioned off. In fact, the Powers violated international law by allowing him to organize the invasion of Persia from Russian territory in July 1911. To make the situation still more difficult for the people, Russia, assured of England's connivance in Persia because of the Morocco crisis in Europe for which England needed Russian help against Germany, sent a fresh ultimatum. Young Persia was stung to the quick thereby, declared a general boycott of Russian and British goods (December 11), and together with the Moslems of Turkey appealed to Germany for sympathy in distress. The Persian boycott, however, proved abortive like the Chinese boycott of America in 1905, because it was an instance of measuring one's strength with a giant. The constitutionalists were completely humiliated, for in a fortnight the Second Majlis fell before a *coup d'état* of the Cabinet (December 24) which considered it impossible and useless to oppose the joint overtures of Russia and England. The understanding was then formally forced from Young Persia that it must not engage the services of foreigners without first obtaining the consent of the two Powers. Azarbaijan became practically a province of Russian Trans-Caucasia, and in 1913 the British despatched an Indian regiment to police Shiraz against the raids of Bakhtiyari and other tribes. Since 1907 Persia had thus been drifting between the Scylla of complete foreign subjection and the Charybdis of the Imperial autocracy encouraged by the Powers.

The violation of Persian neutrality was therefore a normal fact of Middle Eastern politics in pre-war times. And this was a natural consequence of the fact that for purposes

of international politics there were three Persias to be reckoned with. The partition of Persia had been consummated by England and Russia through a mutual agreement on August 31, 1907, just a year after the constitutional triumph of Young Persia (August 5, 1906). The Majlis was not consulted by the Powers prior to the act, nor has that body ever recognized the tripartite division of the country in its administrative or financial measures. But so far as the larger world is concerned, the territorial reconstruction in Persia was a *fait accompli* contrary to the now universally acknowledged postulate of self-determination for peoples. The juristic aspect of the Persian situation has been paralleled in November 1917 by the American-Japanese Agreement (Ishii-Lansing pact) about China without consulting that country at all.

The three divisions are:

1. The Russian sphere, or Northern Persia covering as far interior as the outskirts of Isfahan (the ancient capital, e.g. under Shah Abbas the Great, the contemporary of Elizabeth) and Yezd, the last stand of Zoroastrianism in its homeland. It includes the richest Persian province of Azarbaijan, the once flourishing tract known as Khorasan, and Teheran, the modern capital.

2. The British sphere, or Southern Persia, with Bunder Abbas as its western terminus, which commands the straits of Ormuz leading to the Persian Gulf as the Gibraltar of the Middle East.

3. The "neutral" sphere, or Central Persia, having for its base the entire Persian Gulf littoral and the Karun River, with the apex at Zulfikar, the point where the Russian Empire, Afghanistan and Persia meet. Its boundaries skirt such cities as Khanikin on the Turkish frontier, Isfahan and Yezd on the north, and Kerman on the south. Shiraz, the home of Saadi and Hafiz, lies within this sphere. It includes the historic province of Fars from which the country derives its name of Persia.

What, now, is the meaning of these three spheres? It was clearly explained by the Agreement itself. Thus, for instance, in regard to Southern Persia, Russia undertook to

guarantee England's monopoly of rights and opportunities by agreeing not to seek any political or commercial concessions for herself or any of her citizens or for the citizens of other countries. She assured, further, that she would not oppose the British Government or its subjects in the acquisition of such concessions. The concessions are of very wide scope embracing railway, banking, telegraph, roads, transport and insurance. Southern Persia was thus to be a preserve for Great Britain unmolested by anybody and positively supported by Russia. Similarly Northern Persia was to be Russia's unchallenged preserve insured and guaranteed by the British Empire.

In Central Persia or the so-called neutral Zone neither Power was to have exclusive rights or privileges. It was, technically speaking, a buffer whereon the back-door influences and intrigues, that are as a rule manipulated secretly in such areas, could have a free play. But to all intents and purposes it was in reality a British sphere, because all important interests within the area were in British hands. British concessionaires had been navigating the Karun River since 1888. Mohammerah at the northeastern head of the Gulf, though nominally a province of Persia, was as noticed above a *de facto* dependency of England like Hyderabad, Egypt and Tibet. The whole Gulf coast was dominated by the British navy from Bushire and Bunder Abbas. Besides, the Maidan i-Naphthun Oilfields which lie within 140 miles N. N. E. of Mohammerah in the neutral sphere were exclusively British according to the terms of the oil concession wrung from the Shah in 1901.

Along with these facts is to be taken into consideration the treaty between Russia and Persia negotiated in 1901 by which the "most favored nation" treatment in commercial matters was to be reserved for the countries already enjoying it. In view of all these conditions the preamble to the document of 1907 in which the solicitude of England and Russia is expressed as to respecting the "integrity and independence of Persia" would at once appear to be a camouflage that deceives nobody. And only the third-rate nations would tolerate the chimerical sham in the loudly proclaimed

“open door” alleged to be obtaining in Persia. No self-respecting Power could be lured by this *ignis fatuus*.

The truth about the Persian situation was certainly not hidden from Germany, just as the United States can not be hoodwinked by mere scraps of paper into believing that there is an “open” door in China in spite of the “special” interests of England, Russia, France and Japan, or that the integrity and sovereignty of the Chinese republic are consistent with the extra-territorial, judicial, customs and other concessions enjoyed by the Powers. It was Germany’s interest, therefore, to restore the independence and annul the partition of Persia. As a new-comer she naturally questioned the *status quo* of the Middle Eastern politics established by the first interlopers. But the miserable failure of German navy, army and diplomacy, and the utter pulverization of the Ottoman Empire, together with the unlooked-for dismemberment of the Russian Colossus, have brought about a most marvelous reconstruction in the map of Asia. The British empire has thus been left not only with the monopoly control over the destiny of entire Persia but also with undisputed suzerainty over every inch of the sea-front from the Suez to Singapore and over the entire land mass south of the great series of Asian water-partings, the Caucasus, the Karakum Desert, the Hindu Kush and the Tian Shan, as well as with opportunities for steady advance from this solid base into the Volga basin and the basins of the Obi and the Yenisei. The complete subjugation of Asia (with the solitary exception of Japan which happens to maintain her independence at home and dispute British advance in China and on the Pacific) by Great Britain appears thus to be the final solution of the Eastern question, that was opened with the Crimean War of 1856–57 and was almost closed by the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907 in regard to Tibet, Afghanistan and Persia.